

In the 'Tween

I know a lot of folks are fretting over whether their favorite lakes will be ice-free in time for the walleye opener, but in between ice fishing and boat fishing seasons is a short-lived and golden opportunity to get up close and personal with returning waterfowl as they push their way north.

My favorite place to do this is a little spot in the Chippewa National Forest that I like to think of as "Mean Goose Point". Named for the gander that patrols this piece of ground, annually we look for the opportunity that is provided as the ice recedes and the water opens. In comparison to many of our lakes, this water opens up a little earlier due to the presence of some moving water. My spouse is particularly good at tracking the timing of this special opportunity, so this weekend we made the first of what will be only a small handful of chances to get in on the action. This is happening plenty late this year, with the result that the birds are piling up in droves.

On account of there was still plenty of snow in the woods just yet, we had to put on snowshoes and trek a ways in order to get there. A pull-behind sled came in handy to ferry in a couple of lawn chairs, a small grill for a little grilled picnic, and my pack with a sharp pair of binoculars and a bird book because I generally find I need to brush up a little in order to help my failing memory with all of the correct names.

The sun beats in on the bank, affording the perfect opportunity to set up that lawn chair and tune in for a great show. For me the stars of the show are usually the trumpeter swans, and they were there in force, with pairs spread up and down the way, heads bobbing and wings shaking as they bugle their warnings to the others about the little piece of ice they have staked out as their temporary turf. Through virtue of their sheer size they put the mean gander in his place, but he still manages to carry on towards the other Canada geese more of his own size.

The swans paddle in place, stirring up the sediments below and breaking their way farther into the slushy icy edge, and as they tip up with white tails to the sky, reach their long necks as far down as they can to find something to eat. Interesting to me was to watch the wood ducks dart in and around the big swans, grabbing at morsels of plants that float to the surface. Puddle ducks can't dive, and I imagine their food is somewhat limited until more of the ice is gone. Other ducks present on the scene included blue-winged teal, northern shovelers, mallards, and both the common and hooded merganser.

The combination of puddle and diving ducks was an interesting mix. It was fascinating to watch ring-necked ducks working the edge of the ice in what looked to be something of a feeding frenzy. They would pop under the ice and reappear, the water nearly churning with the fast action. The opportunistic wood ducks were also working that end of things, snatching at any food item that surfaced that was not already claimed by somebody else. A few tiny grebes popped in and out, their diminutive size clearly no match for the larger fowl. Also known as the "water witch", the pied-billed grebe is unique in that it can enter the water by diving forwards, like a diving duck, or by sinking downwards, like a submarine. They can even swim around down there like that for a while, with just their tiny bill protruding.

Breeding bird behavior is fascinating, with courtship displays being highly ritualized. There were several just plain goofy goldeneyes courting a female who didn't appear to be real interested. The heads of common goldeneyes snap back clear to their backs in a jerky movement reminiscent of a wind-up toy. An incredibly fast flyer, small flights of these ducks would come and go. Sometimes you could hear the whistle of the wings before you saw the birds coming in.

Pelicans will frequent this location when the water opens up a bit more. Just now, they are parked over on the river, and every now and then take a fly by as they check out the developing opportunities in the emerging watery landscape below.

From our vantage point in the lawn chairs, you could clearly see the nest of a pair of bald eagles. The eagles are hustling right now, and many of your viewing opportunities on the Chippewa while the lakes are still frozen are along the roadsides as the birds capitalize on road-killed deer. A carcass near my home disappeared completely in just a couple of days. Every now and then, one of the eagles at Mean Goose Point would come on over to the little sea of waterfowl activity. The swans paid them no mind, so must be such a size that they do not get hassled, but when the eagle came close enough, all of the puddle ducks would take to the air. I suppose the divers are better off just to take a plunge, although the goldeneyes take off with fewer strides across the water than do other diving ducks.

Across the bay in the tops of some pine trees is a great blue heron rookery. It always surprises me how early these birds return, often while open water is so scarce you think that surely some of them starve to death. The croaking calls of the nesting herons sound prehistoric. Unlike most rookeries I have seen where the nests are clearly visible in dead flooded timber, these birds are nesting in upland red pine, and you can't see many of them through the tree branches. I was



surprised to count at least 30 birds when they all got up at once and took to the air. I wondered what got them going, but maybe that eagle is hungry enough to try for a heron in a tree.

We also enjoyed a few visits from an otter. The first time he appeared, I don't think he registered we were there, as his attention was clearly on the feeding fowl. I

imagine he occasionally snags a duck that is too preoccupied to notice him sneaking up under the

ice. Later on when he became aware of us, we would only catch a glimpse of part of a head as he barely peaked out from a hole in the ice for a quick look. There was also a muskrat working near us, and likely our hungry otter had quite an interest in that tasty bit.

The colors of the waterfowl were brilliant against the grey of the ice and white of the snow banks. Of course, my photos can never do it justice, so unless you want to leave it up to your imagination, you shall just have to make a little trip to the water yourself. It took some effort, but it sure does a heart good to appreciate all of the interesting bird life that is piling up around us. The show changes daily this time of year. Try not to miss it.



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